

Whose messages?

Thoughts on how the choice of extension programme objectives can and should be made

by Anne van den Ban

Extension education aims at affecting the behaviour of people in a desirable direction. But who decides which direction is desirable? Government extension agents in several Asian and African countries tell me that they should do this in cooperation with the agricultural research workers. Some of these research workers believe that they can better do it alone. Many staff members of non-governmental organisations do not agree with this opinion, because they are convinced that the villagers should decide themselves about the development of their farms. Who is right?

I think that the answer depends on the situation. Considerations for this decision should be:

1. Who has the *right* to make this decision?
2. Who is best informed to make this decision; in other words; who holds the necessary *knowledge*?
3. What is the impact of the choice of the decision-makers on the *motivation* to realise this decision and on the personal development of the villagers?
4. What is the relation between the extension programme and the agricultural *development policy* of the government?

This article discusses some of the above questions.

Right to decision-making

Some 40 years ago I asked a farmer in the Netherlands whether he used artificial insemination. His answer was: 'God has created a cow and a bull. Are we people allowed to change this?' For many farmers in other countries also, religious considerations play a role in their decision-making. In my view an extension agent does not have the right to state whether it is these considerations or the criterion of family income which should be the more important in decision-making. This is a choice based on values and I see no reason to assume that the values of the extension agent are better than those of the villagers.

This also holds true for many other decisions in which values are involved. Assume, for example, that the use of fertilisers in rainfed agriculture will on the average increase family income, but will also increase risk. Then only the family can decide whether income or risk is most important to them. An extension agent might help them to think about the consequences of this decision in a systematic way, but he has no right to persuade villagers to make the same decision he would have made if he was in their position.

Knowledge required for decision-making

This does not mean that an extension agent should never persuade villagers to change their behaviour. Many children die from diarrhoea, which could easily be prevented with oral rehydration techniques. Here extension agents, parents and children will nearly always agree about the goals, whereas the extension agent might be the only one who knows how the goals can be realised. This can also happen in agriculture. Then the extension agent can, and in my view should, use the most effective communication techniques to persuade villagers to apply this knowledge.

In agriculture, however, the extension agent often has only a part of the knowledge which is needed for decision-making, whereas the farmer and his family have another part. They will know their goals, the amount of capital they have, the labour requirements of their farm in different months, their relations with other villagers, the quality of their land and the possibility to make income from outside agriculture. The extension agent might also have some of this knowledge, but usually less than the farm family has themselves. To develop the most productive farming system for this family, therefore, the knowledge of the farm family and of the extension agent has to be integrated. This can be done in a dialogue in which the extension agent listens carefully to the farmer, but not in an attempt to convince the farmer how he should improve his farming system.¹

Farmers have been observing the growth of their crops and animals all their life. As a result they often have very valuable information on agronomy and animal husbandry, which researchers and extension agents do not have. This is especially true in rainfed agricultures with its large variation in agro-ecological situations. Farmers might be well informed about the qualities of different plant varieties or about the value of mixed cropping systems for risk reduction.^{2,3}

An extension worker cannot decide on behalf of a farm family what are the things which should influence its farming decisions.

An outsider can only ever have part of the knowledge which is needed for farm decision-making

Farmers' indigenous technical knowledge should not be neglected.

Motivation to realise decisions

We do not always realise our good intentions; this is also true for farmers. An extension agent might convince farmers to start to grow vegetables, but this will only be a profitable crop if they take good care for these vegetables. The probability that this will happen is much larger if farmers have made this decision themselves than if the extension agent has made for them the decision that they are to grow vegetables. Persuading farmers to change increases their dependency on government officers, whereas creating a situation in which farmers make good decisions themselves will increase their capability in decision-making.

This particularly is important because village extension workers cannot possibly make good decisions for all their farmers. There is so much variation in farm size, quality of land, availability of capital and labour, family goals, etc., that different farmers in the same village should often make different decisions on the production technologies they use.⁴

A major task of extension agents is to develop the human resources among their farmers to make good decisions. A major resource for development which is underutilised in many developing countries is the intelligence of their villagers. Stimulating villagers to make their own decisions helps to develop this resource.

Extension workers cannot possibly make recommendations which will be valid for *all* their client farmers.

A major task of extension workers should be to develop farm people's capacity to make good decisions.



Juliet Breese

A technically competent extension worker may have a useful opinion on the appropriate solution to a particular problem . . . but can only guide collective – or individual – decision-making.

Development policy

The agricultural extension programme is one of the instruments which a government uses to realise the objectives of its agricultural policy. Therefore the government likes to influence the objectives of the extension programme. How much influence can villagers then have on these objectives?

The government should realise what the possibilities and the limitations are of agricultural extension as a policy instrument. It is a very effective instrument to help farmers to reach their own goals better, where, for example, research and on-farm experience have created new opportunities for farmers which are not yet known to them. However extension is *not* an effective instrument to reach policy objectives which are not in the farmers' interest.⁵ Suppose that a country has a surplus of grains and a shortage of edible oils and therefore an objective of agricultural policy is to switch from grain production to oil seed production. Extension can only contribute to the realisation of this objective after price policy has made it profitable for (some) farmers to make this switch. Then they will be interested to learn how they can grow oil seeds most efficiently.

This implies that in order to decide on the objectives of the extension programme we have first to learn from the farmers why they do not yet farm in agreement with the objectives of the agricultural development policy – why, for example, they do not grow more oil seeds. If this is (partly) lack of knowledge or to some extent lack of motivation, then it should become an objective of the extension programme to promote oilseed production. But programme objectives cannot and should not be

Extension alone cannot be an effective means of pursuing national agricultural development objectives.

determined entirely by the agricultural development policy of the government. An awareness of farmers' attitudes should have an important influence on these objectives.

Extension workers' technical knowledge is rarely matched by their capacity to understand the social and political complexities of village life.

Formal training in group dynamics enables the extension worker only to guide collective decision-making.

To suggest that rural people should themselves influence the objectives and content of extension programmes, is to raise the issue of conflicts of power and interest within rural communities. Ways of handling such conflicts are being explored.

Individual and collective decisions

Some decisions are taken by farmers individually (for example, on the use of urea), others are taken by groups of farmers collectively (for example, on the management of an irrigation tank.) Collective decisions in particular have both a technical aspect (for example, how to construct the dam) and a 'process' aspect (for example, how to make the decision who gets how much water at what time.) In some situations the extension agent will be an expert on the technical aspect, but hardly ever will s/he be an expert on the process aspect. Even if the extension agent is well trained in group dynamics, s/he knows the power structure, the conflicts and the personalities in a village much less well than the villagers themselves. S/he cannot tell the villagers what is the most effective way of collective decision-making in their village, although as an outsider trained in group dynamics s/he might be able to guide them in this decision-making process.

We might conclude that in many situations villagers themselves should make decisions on objectives of extension programmes or at least should influence these decisions. Unfortunately it is not yet clear how this can be done most effectively.⁶ Large differences in power and in interests often cause serious conflicts within villages. J.K. Ray (1986) gives a lively description of such conflicts.⁷ As a result the village council might – although will not necessarily – take decisions which are against the interests of the less powerful groups in their village. The FAO's Small Farmers Development Manual (1978) suggests the development of small homogeneous groups in the village.⁸ This would make it possible for the extension agent to enter dialogue with each of these groups and then make a decision on the objectives of the extension programme himself, taking into account the information he got and the opinions he heard in each of these groups. Others (for example Robert Chambers) suggest giving support to the less powerful groups in the village. Ray makes clear that this is only possible if the extension agents get support for this policy from powerful groups at higher levels in the government.⁹ In Korea one has good experiences with residential courses on agricultural development for farmers, in which directors of ministries and cabinet members participate as students and not as teachers. Group discussions and field visits are the major teaching methods used in these courses.⁹

Also by listening to individual farmers the extension agents can get an idea about their objectives. A difficulty is that their contact farmers are usually not representative for all the farmers in the village.¹⁰ It is often the more progressive farmers with larger holdings who might deviate in their objectives from the other farmers in their village.

This kind of decision-making about the goals of the extension programme for the village as a whole and certainly for the block or the district as a whole is not easy. In advising an individual farmer it is much easier to take their goals into account by using a non-directive approach and/or participatory models of dialogue.¹¹

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